CHAPTER I

MARX AND ENGELS LOOK TO AMERICA

For Mark and Engels the years between 1848 and 1880 had been bewildering and frustrating. When they had written the *Communist Manifesto,* the red "specter" haunting Europe had seemed certain to sweep away the old order of capitalism within a few years. Thirty-two years later the prospect of a victory for the world proletariat was farther away than ever. In 1880 the socialist party was illegal in Germany. Stirrings of discontent among English trade unionists had as yet failed to turn them into enemies of capitalism; and continental workers, if more restless, were no more daring in their behavior. There were many encouraging signs of progress. The German movement was strong despite Bismarck's best efforts to overpower it. Jules Guesde was just about ready to launch a Marxist party in France, and a middle-class Englishman named H. M. Hyndman was preparing himself to teach scientific socialism to workers across the Channel. But the times were not ripe for an organization to replace the First International which had quietly expired in Philadelphia in 1876. In 1880 Marx had three years to live. He was to die knowing that the influence of many of his enemies, Bakunin, Proudhon, and Lassalle among them, still corrupted the thinking of the working classes on the Continent. Neither he nor Engels (who was to die in 1895), although they both counseled caution on many occasions, ever put aside their belief in the imminence of the socialist revolution. But neither did they explain completely, even to their own satisfaction, the unexpected staying power of European capitalism.

Prior to the rapid growth of the American economy after the

Civil War they had been able to assign part of the blame for the persistence of European capitalism on the New World. For one thing, the very discovery of North America, with the subsequent settlement of the United States and the opening of rich new markets, had greatly stimulated the expansion of capitalism. In addition, the continuing agricultural base of the American economy had given Europe for many years a convenient outlet for its surplus manufactured products and enabled it to avert the normally disastrous effects of capitalist overproduction. As late as 1867, in the first volume of his great work *Capital,* Marx had analyzed the United States both as a colony of Europe and as a pillar of exploitive European class society.[1]

Even worse, from the standpoint of Marx and Engels, pre-Civil War America had exerted an alarming attractive power over proletarian participants in the European class struggle. Lured by the promise of opportunity and independence, European socialists had forsaken the fight at home and sailed across the Atlantic in search of a rural paradise. Moreover, many of Marx's and Engels' allies, who had been forced to immigrate to the New World following the upheavals of 1848, had cast off their radicalism almost as soon as they had disembarked at an American port. Engels had not neglected to caution his friend and co-worker Joseph Weydemeyer upon the latter's sailing for New York in 1851:

> That you are going to America is bad, but I really don't know what other advice to give you if you can't find anything in Switzer-

[1] *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy,* translated from the third German edition by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, edited by Frederick Engels, revised according to the fourth German edition by Ernest Untermann (New York, 1906), 493. See also Marx's and Engels' preface to the 1882 Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto.* England especially had benefitted from American trade. In the opinion of Marx and Engels the conservatism of the English worker had rested on his participation in England's relative prosperity resulting from England's trade with America. Before the Civil War, America had not only imported great quantities of English goods, but the southern states had provided England with one of its most essential raw materials—cotton. Marx had referred to slave-grown cotton as one of the two pivots on which English industry rested (New York *Tribune,* Oct. 14, 1861)—a fact which had explained to him the sympathy of the English bourgeoisie for the southern cause.

> land. . . . Your greatest handicap, however, will be the fact that the useful Germans who are worth anything are easily Americanized and abandon all hope of returning home; and then there are the special American conditions: the ease with which the surplus population is drained off to the farms, the necessarily rapid and rapidly growing prosperity of the country, which makes bourgeois conditions look like a *beau idéal* to them, and so forth.[2]

Nor had Marx concealed his anger toward Hermann Kriege, a former member of the League of the Just and a German immigrant to the United States, upon Kriege's almost immediate acceptance of "Americanism" as a surrogate for his former socialism. In his new homeland Kriege had come to believe that a sensible homestead act could provide a permanent solution to any American social problem.[3]

For Marx and Engels the promise of purity and innocence associated with America's distance from Europe and its vast unsettled areas had only spelled trouble. At the same time that many other European radicals had looked at the relatively unmarked, pre-Civil War face of America with longing and hope, Marx and Engels had shown complete exasperation. An image of Eden had not attracted their fancy in the slightest; socialist progress everywhere, they knew, was contingent upon America's fall from grace. For so long as America provided Europeans with an alternative to their life at home, European radicals would be tempted to follow one of two equally futile courses: to immigrate or to try to refashion Europe in America's image. Either line of action, Marx and Engels had warned, would ultimately lead nowhere.

Both men in the 1840's had insisted that what then seemed to many a paradise would soon be spoiled by the same social conflicts prevailing in Europe. *Men and Manners in America*, a book (contemporary with Tocqueville's more famous study) by the English visitor to the United States, Thomas Hamilton, provided Marx with evidence of an urban proletariat which already in the mid-

[2] Letter from Engels to Weydemeyer, Aug. 7, 1851, *Letters to Americans, 1848–1895*, ed. by Alexander Trachtenberg (New York, 1953), 25–26.

[3] Peter von Struve, "Zwei bisher unbekannte Aufsätze von Karl Marx aus den vierziger Jahren," *Die Neue Zeit*, Vol. XIV, Part II (1895–96), 4–11.

1840's was springing up along America's eastern seaboard.[4] The American economist Henry Carey had taken the early experience of his country as proof of the ability of capital and labor to coexist harmoniously; Marx had replied contemptuously,

> That bourgeois society in the United States has not yet developed far enough to make the class struggle obvious and comprehensible is most strikingly proved by *H. C. Carey* (of Philadelphia), the only American economist of importance. He attacks *Ricardo,* the most classical representative (interpreter) of the bourgeoisie and the most stoical adversary of the proletariat, as a man whose works are an arsenal for anarchists, socialists, and all the enemies of bourgeois society. He accuses not only him, but Malthus, Mill, Say, Torrens, Wakefield, McCulloch, Senior, Wakley, R. Jones, etc., in short, the economic masterminds of Europe, of tearing society apart and paving the way for civil war by their proof that the economic bases of the different classes must give rise to a necessary and ever-growing antagonism between them. He tries to refute them, not like the fatuous Heinzen, to be sure, by linking the existence of classes to the existence of *political* privileges and *monopolies,* but by attempting to demonstrate that *economic* conditions—rent (landed property), *profit* (capital), and wages (wage labor)—are conditions of cooperation and harmony rather than conditions of struggle and antagonism. All he proves, of course, is that he takes the "undeveloped" social conditions of the United States to be "normal" social conditions.[5]

Engels had further forecast in 1845 America's rapid emergence from a colonial status. Within twenty years, he had written in *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844,* American competition in the world market would deliver a fatal blow to English capitalist prosperity and dramatically reverse the former role of America as a prop of European capitalism.[6]

[4] Lewis S. Feuer, "The North American Origin of Marx's Socialism," *Western Political Quarterly,* XVI (March 1963), 53–67. See also Maximilien Rubel, "Notes on Marx's Conception of Democracy," *New Politics,* I (Winter 1962), 78–90.

[5] Marx to Weydemeyer, March 5, 1852, *Letters to Americans,* 44–45.

[6] *The Condition of the Working Class in England,* trans. and ed. by W. O. Henderson and W. H. Chaloner (New York, 1958), 333.

For these reasons the American Civil War had assumed great importance for Marx and Engels. They had both wished the end of slavery and had entertained some fantasies about a labor-based abolition movement—even calling Abraham Lincoln "the single-minded son of the working class"—but this was not the main thing. The war, so their interpretation went, by destroying the considerable power of southern agrarian interests and by clearing the way for the untrammeled growth of northern industry, had made it possible for the United States to enter the "revolutionary phase." The United States could not dampen revolutionary flames in Europe much longer because capitalism had been freed to produce the same lamentable social conditions it had spawned in Europe.[7] The termination of America's colonial status with respect to Europe and the loss of America's power to enervate the revolutionary spirit of European workers would have decisive effects on the European class struggle. European capitalists would soon find themselves in serious straits, and the proletariat would no longer do them the favor of sailing off to America in search of alternatives to oppression and suffering in Europe. Marx had been jubilant and had written in the 1867 preface to *Capital,* "As in the eighteenth century the American War of Independence sounded the tocsin for the European middle class, so in the nineteenth century, the American Civil War sounded it for the European working class."

By 1880 Marx and Engels felt justified in congratulating themselves on the total disappearance of the pre-Civil War America which had been so troubling to their schemes. The American economy, once slaves and slaveholders had been rudely kicked into modernity, had leaped forward with such great energy that Marx and Engels now saw only cause for optimism in the American situation. In the world picture confronting them in 1880, the United States was the one thing which evoked unqualified cheerfulness. It gave them an assurance, soon justified, in the impending resurgence of socialist strength in Europe. For in place of a rural economy,

[7] Marx to Engels, April 23, 1866, *The Civil War in the United States,* ed. by Richard Enmale (New York, 1937), 277. For some illuminating comments about Marx's and Engels' writings on the Civil War, see Eugene D. Genovese, "Marxian Interpretations of the Slave South," in *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History,* ed. by Barton Bernstein (New York, 1968).

there was now in the United States a strong and rapidly growing industrial economy. In place of a harmonious social situation, there was now the inception of class struggle. In place of equality, rich and poor were more clearly differentiated than anywhere else in the world. Opportunity and social mobility in the United States, Marx and Engels thought, were as obsolete as the unselfish dedication of Washington or the homespun integrity of Lincoln.

The exasperation which a pre-Civil War America had brought Marx and Engels was now gone, and in its place rose the expectation (fulfilling Engels' prophecy of 1845) that American competition in the world market would precipitate a permanent economic crisis in European capitalist countries. In their 1882 preface to the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto,* recalling the earlier time when the United States acted as a "pillar" of European capitalism, Marx and Engels wrote,

> How very different today. Precisely European immigration fitted North America for a gigantic agricultural production, whose competition is shaking the very foundations of European landed property—large and small. At the same time it enabled the United States to exploit its tremendous resources with an energy and on a scale that must shortly break the industrial monopoly of Western Europe, and especially of England, existing up to now.[8]

Matters so stood in 1880 that Marx's and Engels' initial regard for the tremendous growth of the American economy was dictated by the expected impact of American expansion on Europe. These men had long been involved in European affairs, and they did not easily shift their focus. What they looked for was something to activate insurgent sentiment at home. Inevitably, however, the spectacular rise of the American economy forced them to give attention also to the future of the American socialist movement. In 1870 Marx had expected the socialist revolution to come first in England because it was the most advanced of all the bourgeois economies.[9] But Eng-

[8] *Communist Manifesto,* intro. by Harold J. Laski (London, 1948), 107–8.

[9] See, for example, Marx to Siegfried Meyer and August Vogt, April 9, 1870, *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Correspondence, 1816–1895: A Selection* (hereafter *Correspondence*), ed. by Dona Torr (New York, 1934), 290, and an interview in the New York *Herald,* Aug. 3, 1871.

land lagged behind in the next decade; and, when an impressed Marx announced in 1879 that "the United States have at present overtaken England in the rapidity of economic progress," he was suggesting a possible new champion for the socialist cause.[10] Once America took the lead away from England in the accumulation and concentration of capital as well—and the day was not far off—the odds would suddenly favor the New World as the site of the first socialist victory. Far away from the battlegrounds where labor and capital had been waging war for half a century, the flag of the cooperative commonwealth would rise.

America has been pictured as a promised land by many different sorts of people, and it is difficult to keep track of them. Sober Puritans and less sober silkworm enthusiasts, recluses camped by a seemingly infinite number of Walden Ponds and gregarious types immersed in the cooperative effort to raise new cities, humanitarian democrats and ruthless entrepreneurs—all these had seen some special virtue in America. In 1880 Marx and Engels were adding their names to the long list of those who had looked with hopeful eyes to the New World. The youthful energy and buoyancy of the United States, so often admired by European visitors to America, had finally gained a usefulness for Marx and Engels. These cliché virtues of American life did not promise a better life for European workers, but they became, in the hands of Marx and Engels, instruments with which to lay low the bourgeoisie. American capitalism had suddenly come to be regarded as a likely spark to ignite socialism's initial victory.

One cannot say with precision when the thought occurred to Marx that the United States might just possibly be the first nation to throw capitalism aside. As early as 1872, when Marx had urged the transfer of the General Council of the First International from London to New York, he had referred to the United States as "becoming the world of the worker, par excellence."[11] The location of the seat of the International in New York, he had said without candor, would be appropriate because the world socialist movement would soon be stronger in the United States than anywhere else.

[10] Marx to N. F. Danielson, April 10, 1879, *Correspondence,* 360.
[11] Rudolf H. Meyer, *Der Emancipationskampf des Vierten Standes,* I (Berlin, 1874), 141–42.

Marx might have believed this, but it had not been important to him at the time. In negotiating for the removal of the General Council, he had been primarily concerned with keeping it safely out of the hands of his enemies in Europe; America's remoteness, not the actual or potential strength of the labor movement in America, had suggested New York to him. By consigning the International to America, Marx had engineered its destruction, and he knew it.

Judging from the contents of his bulky correspondence with various Americans, one would gauge Marx's interest in anything happening in the New World throughout the 1870's as nil. He had written to German-American colleagues, not to ask them what was going on in the United States (although this was a period of considerable labor turmoil), but to get their opinions about the ebb and flow of European developments. To many immigrants who had corresponded with Marx, Europe had still represented home—the place from which they had been forced to leave and the place to which many wanted to return as soon as the socialist revolution began there in earnest.

Marx's sudden burst of interest in the United States at the end of the 1870's, on the other hand, was unquestionably genuine. The ripening of the plants of industrialism growing since the Civil War, as we know from the correspondence of his late life, stimulated his attention in plans for an American harvest. In the latter part of 1880 he asked his friend and confidant Friedrich A. Sorge to send him information about California's economic development, for "nowhere else has the upheaval most shamelessly caused by capitalist centralization taken place with such speed."[12] And in 1881 he criticized Henry George sharply for not having wondered:

> How did it happen that in the United States, where, relatively, that is, compared with civilized Europe, the land was accessible to the great masses of the people and still is to a certain degree (again relatively), capitalist economy and the corresponding enslavement of the working class have developed *more rapidly* and *more shamelessly* than in any other country![13]

[12] Marx to Sorge, Nov. 5, 1880, *Letters to Americans*, 126.
[13] Marx to Sorge, June 20, 1881, *Letters to Americans*, 129.

Moreover, the masses in America, Marx thought, were quicker (because of past privileges) than the masses in Europe to "resent the form of a progress accomplished at their expense"; they also possessed greater political means to make their resentment felt.[14] Marx's arguments in 1872 for the transfer of International headquarters to New York were spurious at the time. But within the decade he found that he might have been right after all and that the "transference of the center of the International to the United States may obtain a very remarkable post festum opportuneness."[15]

Marx's death cut off any further speculation on his part about the chances for a socialist victory in America. He was not to see in his lifetime the rise of either a strong socialist party or a strong socialist-oriented trade union in the United States. In the early 1880's, America's Socialist Labor party, already a weak organization of 1500 members (mostly German), split into warring factions over the issue of anarchism. Several independent workingmen's political parties had earlier made brief appearances on the American scene but had not achieved even moderate success. While bourgeois ideas might have become hollow and self-destructive in America, the American worker had, at least through 1883, clung stubbornly to them.

The legacy of Marx's interest in America passed on to Engels. From the early 1880's until his own death in 1895 Engels kept a watchful eye on occurrences in the United States. In 1888, he even undertook a brief voyage across the Atlantic to see things for himself. Unhappily for Engels the welcome expansion of American capitalism did not immediately have noticeably adverse effects on the old order either in Europe or America. The 1880's, in contrast to the 1870's, did witness an extraordinary burst of socialist activity in Europe. Social Democratic parties which united workers and socialist intellectuals into organizations inspired by Marxist principles came to life in most European countries. Yet the revolution remained as elusive as ever, and Engels discovered that the flowering of American capitalism, despite its prospective healthy effects, burdened him with a new puzzle: in view of America's rapid industrial growth, what

[14] Marx to Danielson, April 10, 1879, *Correspondence*, 360.
[15] Heinz Neuman, *Marx and Engels on Revolution in America* (Chicago, 1926), 27.

accounted for the continuing obtuseness of the American laborer? Why could the Yankee wage earner not accept, as did so many of his European brethren, his degraded condition under capitalism as irreversible and turn to socialism? Engels' first tentative answers revealed blithe optimism. The American worker, he wrote, had not been exposed long enough to the abuses of capitalism. European workers had understood and accepted socialism only after long years of experience with capitalist oppression, and Americans could learn about the laws of capitalist development only through the same kind of contact. Moreover, Engels thought, all Anglo-Saxons showed a bent toward practicality at the expense of theory—a tendency which grew especially marked when they were placed in a young, expanding nation like the United States.[16] American workers were naturally suspicious of a complex theoretical system for which objective experience had not yet prepared them.

Engels saw none of these factors as disabling or even troublesome. On the contrary, socialism would sink into the American consciousness far more quickly than it had in the European. An initial fumbling with abstract doctrines, Engels thought, was of negligible significance in view of the dynamic qualities of American life which had in the past moved the United States forward with incredible speed. Americans might not stop to analyze where they were going, but they did succeed in getting there faster than any other people. They had blindly zipped through the capitalist phase of development; they might just as blindly tumble into socialism. Where else in fact (according to Engels' fundamental assumptions) could they go? Capitalism, like everything else in America, had developed too rapidly to become a fixed institution; and the lack of institutional barriers always favored progress. Engels reiterated over and over in his correspondence that, once started, the American socialist movement would move "with an energy and impetuousness compared with which we in Europe shall be mere children."[17]

By the mid-1880's Engels' optimism, if it were to be sustained, needed a measure of objective confirmation. For this reason Engels greeted with great enthusiasm Henry George's 1886 campaign to

[16] Engels to Florence Kelley Wischnewetzky, Aug. 13, 1886, *Letters to Americans,* 160.

[17] Engels to Hermann Schlüter, March 30, 1892, *Letters to Americans,* 243.

become mayor of New York City. George was not a socialist, and neither Marx nor Engels ever took him for anything but a petty bourgeois economist. Yet Engels both publicly and and privately urged socialists in America to work for George's election. The theoretical position of the author of *Progress and Poverty* was not so important. George was running on an independent labor ticket, and for the moment nothing else mattered. To Engels the emergence of a third-party labor movement marked the establishment of a strong and genuine class consciousness among American workers. In an 1887 preface for the American edition of *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* he wrote,

> Ten months have elapsed since, at the translator's wish, I wrote the Appendix to this book; and during these ten months, a revolution has been accomplished in American society such as, in any other country, would have taken at least ten years. . . . In European countries, it took the working class years and years before they fully realized the fact that they formed a distinct and, under the existing social conditions, a permanent class of modern society; and it took years again until this class-consciousness led them to form themselves into a distinct political party, independent of, and opposed to, all the old political parties, formed by the various sections of the ruling classes. On the more favored soil of America, where no medieval ruins bar the way, where history begins with the elements of the modern bourgeois society as evolved in the seventeenth century, the working class passed through these two stages of its development within ten months.[18]

The remaining problem of getting the American labor party to adopt proper socialist principles would take care of itself. For Engels it was enough to witness the breaking down of the apathy of the American proletariat; once things were moving, "they will go fast, too, faster than anywhere else, even though on a singular road,

[18] *Letters to Americans,* 285–87. This preface was written especially for an American edition of Engels' book translated by Florence Kelley Wischnewetzky. The unduly enthusiastic report of two recent English visitors to America, Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling, had influenced Engels' optimistic appraisal of American conditions; but he had independently observed signs of labor unrest outside New York City. In eleven states other than New York, workers had organized some type of labor party.

which seems, from the theoretical standpoint, to be an almost insane road." [19]

Engels found it extremely gratifying to see events in the United States vindicating the earlier predictions of Marx and himself, especially in view of the substantial uplift in the Marxist crusade elsewhere in the 1880's. It would not do for America to be left behind in the great sweep of history, and Engels took frank pleasure in announcing the breakdown in American social harmony twenty years after the Civil War. The country which European liberals had pointed to for so long as an exception to Marxist-predicted class antagonism was probably to become the most blazing inferno of all those created by the contradictions of capitalist production. With great satisfaction Engels wrote to Sorge in November 1886,

> In Europe the effect of the American elections in November was tremendous. That England, and America in particular, had no labor movement up to now was the big trump card of the radical republicans everywhere, especially in France. Now these gentlemen have been utterly contradicted; on November 2nd the whole foundation, especially of Mr. Clemenceau's policy, collapsed. "Look at America," was his eternal motto; "where there is a real republic, there is no poverty and no labor movement!" And the same thing is happening to the liberals and "democrats" in Germany and here [England]—where they are also witnessing the beginnings of their own movement. The very fact that the movement is so sharply accentuated as a labor movement and has sprung up so suddenly and forcefully has stunned the people completely.[20]

Engels happily imagined that the sudden progress of the labor movement in the United States would prompt European labor leaders to more vigorous action. Especially in England he detected a trace of jealousy among trade union officials and predicted a competition in socialism between the two great Anglo-Saxon nations: "John Bull doesn't want to be outdone by those other fellows;

[19] Engels to Sorge, Sept. 16, 1886, *Letters to Americans,* 161.
[20] Engels to Sorge, Nov. 29, 1886, *Letters to Americans,* 164.

it is the *only* foreign influence that has any drawing power here."[21]

The George candidacy, as it turned out, did not produce a movement up to Engels' expectations. In 1886 George, the candidate of the United Labor party, had run second in a field of three (the unfortunate third man being Theodore Roosevelt). Before the next election a split developed in the ranks of the party between orthodox socialists and single taxers, and it ceased to be an effective vote-getting mechanism. Engels' hopes for one or two million votes for a workingman's party at the next election proved to be wildly chimerical. Meanwhile the European movement which briefly in 1886 had struck observers as no more, and in many cases less, advanced than the American surged forward and made the Yankee wage earners' bovine qualities more noticeable than ever before. Rather than becoming completely disheartened by this turn of events, Engels merely resigned himself to the erratic nature of American development. In 1887 he wrote,

> History is on the move over there at last, and I must know my Americans badly if they do not astonish us all by the vastness of their movement, but also by the gigantic nature of the mistakes they make, through which they will finally work out their way to clarity. Ahead of everyone else in practice and still in swaddling clothes in theory—that's how they are, nor can it be otherwise. But it is a land without tradition (except for the religious), which has begun with the democratic republic, and a people full of energy as no other. The course of the movement will by no means follow the classic straight line, but travel in tremendous zigzags and seem to be moving backward at times, but that is of much less importance there than with us.[22]

The zigzags could be colossal and bring great defeat on the tail of great success; but even in 1892, when the socialist movement was at a low ebb in America, Engels remained convinced that "the

[21] Engels to Sorge, April 9, 1887, and Engels to Florence Kelley Wischnewetzky, Feb. 22, 1888, *Letters to Americans,* 183 and 197.
[22] Engels to Sorge, Aug. 8, 1887, *Letters to Americans,* 190.

advances always become more powerful, the setbacks less paralyzing."[23]

The disappointing sequel to the encouraging beginning of 1886 did prompt Engels to reassess his earlier views about the reasons behind the slow progress of socialist ideas in the United States. A second look forced him to see other factors at work besides the American workers' relatively recent exposure to capitalism. After all, in the absence of other barriers, twenty years of sharply rising class antagonisms should have pushed American workers toward some permanent alignment with socialism. The apparent progress in that direction indicated by the George campaign had backfired. Rather than an unshakable betrothal, American workers had demonstrated an unwillingness to begin even a mild flirtation with socialism. Engels remained generally (even enthusiastically) optimistic about the prospects for socialism in the United States, but the failure of any concrete progress to materialize remained a problem to vex him the rest of his life.

One source of difficulty which Engels located in the German leadership of the American Socialist Labor party aroused his fury. Engels was instinctively suspicious of all European immigrants to the New World. Perhaps the political situation at home had left them with no choice except to move across the Atlantic. But perhaps (and this often seemed more likely to Engels) their migration was motivated by a simple failure of nerve; many of them in going to the New World, while not deserting the radical socialist cause, evidently preferred an environment where their heroic posture would get them into less trouble. In any case, Engels' estimate of German socialists in America was not high, for with few exceptions, he thought, only the least competent of the German revolutionaries had wound up in the United States. His quarrels with the leaders of America's SLP grew more and more heated and led to a complete break by the end of the 1880's.

A part of the basis for the hostility between Engels and the German socialists in America resulted from personal misunderstandings. Part also resulted from the unfortunate and bitter aftermath of a tour of America undertaken in 1886 at the request of the SLP by two of his good friends, Edward and Eleanor Marx Aveling.

[23] Engels to Schlüter, March 30, 1892, *Letters to Americans*, 242–43.

But Engels blasted the German socialists in America mainly for their refusal to adjust to American conditions. Their tactics, Engels believed, were self-defeating. The arrogance with which the Germans hawked socialist ideas, their old-maidish concern for rigidly pure orthodoxy, their disdain for the theoretical backwardness of the American (and, for that matter, all aspects of American life), singularly ill-equipped them to lead the Anglo-Saxon worker from the shadows of his bourgeois cave. How could Americans become acquainted with socialist ideas when the socialist press in America was almost entirely printed in German? To be effective schoolmasters, the German socialists would have to Americanize themselves and learn to work from within existing trade unions. Marx and Engels both demonstrated considerable flexibility in devising tactics for various countries, and throughout their long lives they showed very little concern about the doctrinal purity of any party other than the German. In many countries, and especially in the United States, where experience had not brought workers to socialism, an insistence on a narrow orthodoxy could serve only to slow advance. In 1894 Engels, who was finally convinced the Socialist Labor party would never learn that lesson, wrote from London,

> The Social-Democratic Federation here shares with your German-American Socialists the distinction of being the only parties that have managed to reduce the Marxian theory of development to a rigid orthodoxy, which the workers are not to reach themselves by their own class feeling, but which they have to gulp down as an article of faith at once and without development. That is why both of them remain mere sects and come, as Hegel says, from nothing through nothing to nothing.[24]

The stubborn practices of the Socialist Labor party did little but reinforce the idea, already strong among American workers, that socialism was an alien ideology unsuited to the climate of the New World.

Aside from the pig-headedness of the German sectarians one special factor endemic to the American environment worked very strongly against an immediate acceptance of socialism. Even before

[24] Engels to Sorge, May 12, 1894, *Letters to Americans*, 263.

the Civil War, Marx and Engels had noted with chagrin the escape-valve qualities of the great western hinterland (again a chagrin contrasting sharply to the attitude of other European social radicals toward the frontier). Workers dissatisfied with their condition in the eastern cities did not rebel—they merely moved. Both Marx and Engels had counted on the rapid rise of American capitalism after the war to nullify this factor, but as late as 1892 Engels was still pointing to the unmanning effect of the American West on proletarian class consciousness. The West did not merely offer the oppressed eastern worker a place to go—a way out and up. Even more damaging to a struggling socialist movement, the large land reserve often turned the laborer into a speculator (or, at least, a potential speculator) and kept his mind running in the same bourgeois circles. Engels wrote,

> Only when the land—the public lands—is completely in the hands of the speculators, and settlement on the land thus becomes more and more difficult or falls victim to gouging—only then, I think, will the time come, with *peaceful* development, for a third party. *Land* is the basis of speculation, and the American speculative mania and speculative opportunity are the chief levers that hold the native-born worker in bondage to the bourgeoisie. Only when there is a generation of native-born workers that cannot expect *anything* from speculation *any more,* will we have a solid foothold in America.[25]

The paradox of a bourgeois-minded proletariat had long bothered Engels in analyzing the English masses. In England and America, he knew, the disturbing phenomenon of workers who admired bankers and industrialists and scorned their own class owed much to the relatively high wage scale prevailing there. Both countries for special historical reasons had been able to maintain a level of prosperity high enough to infect Anglo-Saxon workers with a snobbish sense of superiority (especially toward workers in continental Europe). But in America the cause of a docile proletariat went even beyond the workers' relative well-being and involved their condition of complete innocence. Earlier, Engels had described America's escape from a feudal past as fortunate because, held back

[25] Engels to Sorge, Jan. 6, 1892, *Letters to Americans,* 239.

by few traditions, the United States could move with infinitely greater speed into the future than was possible in Europe. But, as he soon discovered, the one tradition the country did have, the dream of going from rags to riches, from an unpropertied to a propertied condition, had very deep and tangled roots; the main trunk of the tradition might be cut, but the land was still not ready for the growth of new ideas. The lucky escape of Americans from the experience of feudal despotism had its unfortunate side, for it handicapped them for recognizing oppression when it appeared in a more brutal modern form. Ironically, the European worker could perceive more easily the exploitation of the American worker under capitalism than the American himself.

Unhappily for Engels the youth of America did not prove to be a completely unmitigated blessing. Youth was another word for immaturity, and along with it went gullibility and a certain soft-headed wistfulness. As Engels correctly stated in one of his last letters about America before his death, these were also the qualities of old age and senility:

> America is the *youngest,* but also the *oldest* country in the world. Over there you have old-fashioned furniture styles alongside those you have invented all yourselves, cabs in Boston such as I last saw in 1838 in London, and in the mountains stagecoaches dating from the seventeenth century alongside the Pullman cars, and in the same way you keep all the intellectual old clothes discarded in Europe. Anything that is out of date over here can survive in America for one or two generations.[26]

Americans did not have much of a past, but what they had they liked and were loath to discard. Idyllic remembrances defined the uniqueness of their nation, an exceptionality on which many had gambled their future. Industrial production might move ahead with tremendous strides, but the worker at the bottom of the social heap still preferred to identify with independent yeoman farmers rather than exploited, enslaved members of the European proletariat. As Engels noted, it was touch and go whether "the mind of the industrial worker or that of the pioneering farmer gains predominance

[26] Engels to Sorge, Jan. 16, 1895, *Letters to Americans,* 269.

in the average man's head."[27] The American worker had yet to comprehend how the acceptance of his present dismal plight as inevitable under capitalism would move him to the verge of his ultimate emancipation and salvation. This understanding, Engels realized, would come only with several more years of increasing poverty. How many, he was no longer sure.

A few additional factors peculiar to American life, Engels noted, further slowed the otherwise-rushing currents of socialism. The varied makeup of the working-class population was one of them. A cultural barrier separated native-born and immigrant labor, and neither group really got along with the other. This situation was further complicated by additional splintering within the two large groups—the native-born into white and Negro and the foreign-born into almost every nationality conceivable. Engels recognized the talent of American capitalists for playing off these various elements against one another, and on account of this he concluded that labor could not speak with one voice until it could speak in one language.[28]

Finally, American socialists confronted the obstacle of the long-standing tradition of two parties in the United States. Engels was only echoing Bryce when he pointed out that because American political parties were based on the acquisition of power rather than concern for principle, third parties could make headway only with great difficulty. In his 1891 preface to Marx's *The Civil War in France,* Engels wrote,

> There is no country in which "politicians" form a more powerful and distinct section of the nation than in North America. There each of the two great parties which alternately succeed each other in power is itself in turn controlled by people who make a business of politics, who speculate on seats in the legislative assemblies of the Union as well as of the separate States, or who make a living by carrying on agitation for their party and on its victory are rewarded with positions.

Engels' disappointing experience with the United Labor Party in

[27] *Ibid.,* 270.
[28] Engels to Schlüter, March 30, 1892, *Letters to Americans,* 242.

1886 led him to caution his American friends in 1892 that "there is no place yet in America for a *third* party."[29] Before a socialist party could expect to win success at the polls, socialist principles had to make considerably more headway among the masses.

These difficulties belonged—and Engels was adamant on this point—to a changing scene and would disappear within a short time. Events in America had not progressed with the rapidity he had thought possible in 1886 and America's inability to get out of "its hobbledehoy stage" was extremely perplexing.[30] But in pointing to the difficulties of socialist advance in America, Engels was in no way trying to define an exceptional category for the United States or exempt it from the general laws of capitalist development. There were difficulties everywhere, and neither he nor Marx had ever expected exactly the same pattern of development in every country[31] One thing alone was certain in the eccentric American growth pattern: capitalist production and capital accumulation could not go forward in the United States much longer without calling forth the antithesis of the bourgeoisie—a strong proletariat determined to destroy the parasitic capitalist system. This was an essential belief for Engels because if capitalism had somehow found a sanctuary in the New World he had lost his claim of being scientific.

By 1895, then, the attitudes of Marx and Engels toward the United States had undergone an interesting cycle. Before the Civil War they had used the New World to explain their way out of a gnawing theoretical difficulty—the failure of the world socialist revolution to materialize. In 1880, shortly before Marx's death, America's rapid

[29] Engels to Sorge, Jan. 6, 1892, *Letters to Americans,* 239. Both Marx and Engels had thought that workers in certain countries where they had an effective political voice could achieve their goals by peaceful means. In a famous speech in Amsterdam in 1872, Marx had predicted that violence might be avoided in the United States, England, and Holland. (Also see interview in New York *Herald,* Aug. 3, 1871.) Yet Engels' letter to Sorge indicated awareness that peaceful acquisition of power might prove impossible—even in a supposedly democratic country with a broad franchise.

[30] Engels to Sorge, Dec. 31, 1892, *Letters to Americans,* 243.

[31] This explains their insistence on flexible tactics. Lenin made some self-serving but interesting comments on this aspect of Marx's thought (comparing Marx's attitudes toward the proper tactics for the labor movement in America, England, and Germany) in his preface to the Russian translation of *Letters from J. F. Becker, J. Dietzgen, F. Engels, K. Marx and Others to F. A. Sorge and Others.* (Reprinted in *Letters to Americans,* 273–85.)

growth as a capitalist power had completely changed this perspective. Rather than frustrating socialist revolution, America now seemed likely to promote revolutionary activity in Europe. America might even prove to be the site of the first successful revolution. In either case America would become the Socialist Promised Land. By 1895 the perspective had shifted again. The theoretical problem of capitalism's unexpected longevity which had faced Marx and Engels all their lives still remained, but post-Civil War America could no longer help to explain it. On the contrary, the failure of socialism to make significant headway in America despite its rapid capitalist development only added new dimensions to old headaches. Engels did not ever lose all of the enthusiasm with which he and Marx had begun to greet developments in America in 1880. Once America had passed England in the rate of economic growth, the possibility was always open that the future of socialism rested on America. But at least some question had been raised as to whether New World youth and vigor would prove more effective than Old World sophistication and wisdom in the realization of socialist goals. (Or, more darkly, whether any of these things would be to any avail.)

The interest of Marx and Engels in America, of course, should be placed in a larger picture; after all they were not the first European socialists who toyed with the idea of America as potentially a promised land for the cooperative commonwealth. (Nor, as the rest of this study seeks to show, were they the last.) Throughout the nineteenth century, utopian visionaries built colonies in America with the expectation of springing from these small beginnings a new social order. For some of the utopians the attraction of America was a supply of cheap land which made their experiments economically feasible. This was what first brought Robert Owen to America. Once he arrived, however, Owen detected in the United States a spirit of adventure and idealism auguring success for his colony at New Harmony. Novelty was still a possibility in America, as was purity and goodness.

The great Saint-Simon, who took a brief and undramatic part in the Battle of Yorktown, was soundly struck by his two-month encounter with the young nation and recalled later, "I realized that the revolution in America signalled the beginning of a new political

era, that this revolution would necessarily bring about major progress in general civilization, and that in a short time it would cause great changes in the social order which then existed in Europe." [32] In 1854 Victor Considérant, a French disciple of Fourier, summed up his hope for America: "When we observe the general march of humanity, we easily perceive that progress, while advancing in Time, displaces itself in Space, and that the focus of social light and impulsion has always proceeded from the East to the West like the Sun." [33] These men saw the same promise in America which attracted political liberals and non-socialist radicals to the New World —its freedom from European influences. On a new continent with a fresh start, men might at last accomplish something commensurate with their best dreams.

Marx and Engels, taking another road to the truths of social science, dismissed the utopians with contempt. The utopians' notion that they could erect a perfect society in their minds and plunk it down in the middle of existing conditions (however virgin those conditions might be) was absurd.[34] Marx and Engels were looking for an entirely different spirit in America than any of the social radicals who had preceded them in Europe. Socialism would not rise from a pristine seed planted in a rural community, but from the decay of an existing social order. What they looked for in America was not purity but corruption, not harmony but chaos, not love but antagonism, not rural seclusion but urban complexity. Engels did seem to speak like some of the utopians when he talked of America's energy and vitality, but it was an energy that led to violence, a vitality that had to tear down before it could build. America would not be a promised land for socialism because it was younger and simpler than Europe. Only as the New World

[32] Quoted in Frank E. Manuel, *The New World of Henri Saint-Simon* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), 20.

[33] Quoted in Halvdan Koht, *The American Spirit in Europe: A Survey of Transatlantic Influences* (Philadelphia, 1949), 205.

[34] Anyone familiar with much nineteenth-century socialist literature will realize the danger of overdrawing a distinction between Marxist and utopian views of America. The utopian and scientific schools did not always turn out to be as different as Marx and Engels had intended. The moral outrages of a utopian writer were sometimes scarcely distinguishable from the supposedly detached, scientific evaluations of a Marxist. None of this, however, vitiates the main point of the paragraph.

grew old and became more complicated and decadent than Europe could it lead the world toward a better society. Most observers who spoke of the promise of America found that promise in America's differences from Europe. Marx and Engels turned this vision on its head. America could become a promised land to the extent that it became just like Europe—and multiplied its vices. Marx and Engels had no use for American goodness, but they found a use for its evil. As things got worse and worse in the New World, its prospects became better and better.